War Diary V - War of the Machines

⍭ ROXY ⍭
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> *"It can't be bargained with. It can't be reasoned with. It doesn't feel pity, or remorse, or fear. And it absolutely will not stop, ever, until you are dead."*
>
> -The Terminator (1984)

If you want to hear a grown man that's never heard a gunshot in real life start crying like baby, mention drones online. The mere image of an FPV drone draws a more visceral reaction than those old Daesh execution video. More annoyingly are people who think that drones are the new foundation of war, that's it's just going to be robots fighting each other until pretty soon. Unsurprisingly, neither of these types can be found anywhere near a trench line. Aside from sensationalist propaganda videos & armchair generals, there is an actual war happening that we can learn from. I feel fit to describe the current situation regarding drones & other unmanned systems. This will mainly focus on how these vehicles are used on the ground & how it impacts the war, not necessarily anything specific. I've written about the "theory" of drones here, this is a more practical look. I also lay out my predictions for the near future of warfare at the end.

Firstly, the ever present FPVs. You all know what they are & how they operate. They actually work in a sort of "hunter-killer" team alongside a reconnaissance drone like a Mavic or SkyDio. The cameras on these FPVs are not great, the recordings you see are generally much better quality than the actual live feed. The reality is they are very poor for actual finding a target unless they're walking through an empty field or something. Even standing in a thin treeline is enough to evade them. The Mavic type drone usually acts as the "hunter," as it can fly longer & actually see things with its good camera/stability.

It's important to remember that FPV's are disposable, they don't get recovered. Every part is chosen based on how cheap it is, even critical avionics & such. Mavics are expensive & not something that can be thrown away without consequence. If the Mavic goes down, the FPV's lose 90% of their effectiveness. As well, weather plays a major role. A mild wind or light rain makes the number of drones up decrease dramatically. Whenever weather gets a bit choppy, ground forces like to start maneuvering & such for this reason.

Of all the FPVs launched, I'm told less than 10% will successfully hit a target. This includes scheduled attacks* on positions that amounts to just flying into a wall. Many simply run out of battery, crash, lose connection, etc. The explosives also often misfire. My sister squad had their MRAP take a direct hit from an FPV armed with an RPG-7 HEAT warhead, which failed to detonate & simply got stuck on the roof of the vehicle. Other components, like batteries or motors, are equally likely to malfunction at some point.

**Scheduled attacks are routine strikes on known positions that may or may not be occupied. Similar tactics have been used by artillery units for decades. The purpose of these strikes is to annoy the targets or attempt to spot any subsequent movement by antsy soldiers. Best to ignore them.*

Fiber-optic FPVs are not the game changer they were back in Kursk. Only maybe 5-10% of FPV's are fiber-optic, so preexisting EW measures are still a good investment. The fiber-optic cable substantially increases the overall price-per-unit of each drone, limiting its main selling point. It's also a substantial increase in weight which results in smaller warheads. Reconnaissance drones have not been spotted using fiber-optic cables, so drone guns are still an excellent choice for combating hunter-killer teams & indirect fire observers.

The real nasty aspect of fiber-optics is that they do not lose connection when flying close to the ground, or more importantly, under the ground. This means they can fly directly through doorways into buildings & underground bunkers. This is not an easy task for amateurs, but a skilled pilot can navigate through an entire bunker system. Fortunately, it's usually too dark to see they these will virtually always explode in the entrance way. It does make it much easier to cave-in positions though. The counter to this is mounting multiple layers of fishing net, blankets, etc. to block its flight path. This was already a technique used to limit light from leaving the bunker & shrapnel from coming in, so nothing particularly new there.

A major threat is the "waiters," FOVs that land along a pathway or outside a known position & simply wait for someone to come by. A waiter dropped two of my teammates last mission & almost wiped me & another not long afterwards. The solution is the same as mines, which waiters effectively are. Watch where you're going, see it before it sees you. Don't bother trying to figure out if it's an actual waiter or just a crashed FPV, just shoot it. It's wise to shoot the battery, propeller arms or fiber-optic coil. Shooting the explosive is fun but an unnecessary danger, it also risks exposing your location if you aren't already compromised. Friendly reconnaissance drones should also perform route clearance to spot & possibly destroy any waiters outside your position or along your route.

Larger drones like the Vampires & Baba Yagas are often used for resupply, which they excel at. They have a fairly easy time at supplying platoon sized elements even behind the zero line. They can also be used to drop heavy ordinance like TM-62 mines or satchel charges onto enemy positions, taking them down. If you hear a large drone hovering over your position & aren't expecting a resupply, get out of there or tuck yourself into a corner because you're about to get hit hard. These drones are very valuable & always worth destroying if you have the opportunity.

Strike drones also aren't exactly anything special. This includes the various models of Shaheds & Lancets, the US has the Switchblade series. At the zero line, these are effectively doing the exact same thing that artillery already does. They mainly aim for static positions like command posts. Unlike long range arty, you can hear these things coming from a mile away & take cover if necessary. Most of these drones are pre-targeted, meaning they are launched & automatically fly to a specific location. A few are manually guided though, I usually see these trying to hit military vehicles coming to & from the front. They aren't a major threat to infantry, but are a major operational concern. EW is generally effective against them but a skilled pilot (or large warhead) can still cause damage as they're already flying towards their target (FPVs simply drop to the ground when connection is lost).

In typical Ukrainian fashion, the solution is retarded & low tech. They simply cover their main supply routes with fishing net which is ridiculously effective at stopping these drones. They usually don't even detonate.

Away from the front line, strike drones have taken over the role of strategic bombing & deep strikes - both of which formally carried out by aircraft before modern air defense systems became prevalent. If you weren't aware, the reason the strategic bombing campaigns over 1940's Europe & 1960's SE Asia had a comically massive amount of explosives dropped is because these bombs were horribly inaccurate. Even the swarms of dozens of B-17s often completely failed to hit their target even once. That's no longer an issue. Power stations, factories, bases & whatever else can now be hit with precision.

The deep strikes are fairly easy to understand. A military base or something gets targeted & blown up. All this means is that POGs are less safe than ever. US forces are actually remarkably prepared for this situation due to the GWOT, where FOBs had to be prepared for regular mortar strikes from insurgents as well as rocket attacks from the Iranians. The same protective measures, like hesco barriers & CWIS guns, are effective here.

Long range reconnaissance drones aren't anything special either. Drones like the Russian Orlan or US Puma have been in service for decades & perform the same missions as always. These are expensive, strategic level assets so it's wise to take them down whenever possible but it's not a concern for the infantry.

These are usually dealt with by using drone interceptors, either suicide drones or FPVs with shotgun shells attached. These & Shahed type drones can be countered with helicopters & basic aircraft as they're slow & large. Ukies use old crop dusters with a PKM mounted on the back. Some Shaheds have been spotted with anti-air missiles mounted, but as far as I'm aware this hasn't had any success yet.

The pick up trucks with DShKs mounted on the bed are stupid, I've never seen them actually take out a Shahed. I can only assume this is more of psychological operation to keep civilians happy since they don't see the interceptor drones or MANPADS.

Aquatic drones won't have much of an effect on maritime operations. They're easily countered with deck mounted machine guns & EW. Anti-ship missiles are still the king of coastal defense, just ask the survivors of the Moskva. These are pretty useful for the wider hybrid war, such as Ukies using them against Russian shadow fleet vessels, or insurgent operations.

Ground drones are getting more & more common. The most common use is as resupply vehicles. They have a low profile & can move as much supplies as an entire squad lugging it in their packs. It's also much safer because losing a UGV is much cheaper than losing men. I've also seen these used a CASEVAC platforms, again limiting the amount of people sticking their neck out.

In recent months, the 3rd Assault Brigade has increasingly been using UGVs in their assaults. One of these assaults consisted of 5 UGVs with no infantry, which was successful as the Russians retreated after running out of rockets. I personally see these UGVs somewhat replacing the heavy weapons squads, using weapons like the .50 cal or Mk19. These systems are incredibly difficult to move with on foot & the 4 man crew is an extremely juicy target. Having this task be performed remotely by a UGV & CROWS mount type set up is both more effective & safer. In that same vein, I strongly suspect disposable UGVs will be used for minefield breaching in the near future.

The counter to UGVs is to shoot it. They aren't tanks, a rifle will easily take out critical components especially in the weapon mount. Grenade & rocket launchers are also that much more effective. I suspect small caliber anti-tank rockets, like the M72 LAW, will make a comeback for this reason.

For future predictions, I think the drone threat will be effectively obsolete by 2030. Anti-drone rounds in both 5.56 & 5.45 have shown remarkable effectiveness for taking out FPVs, a great video about them can be watched here. Similarly, trophy systems have been around for decades. These were developed to take out RPGs & other rockets, an FPV is much easier to hit. Newer models have begun using machine guns for more efficiency & to limit the danger to surrounding infantry. A vehicle of these systems, with good EW, optical & radar detection systems will be effectively invulnerable to any drone attack. It could also easily protect any surrounding infantry as well.

I think drone interceptors will also effectively nullify the threat of reconnaissance & strike drones, as well as limiting the FPV threat. Essentially fighter drones with the sensors necessary to detect enemy drones & destroy them. Suicide drones like this already operate, I also have a theory that larger fixed wing drones with small missiles will soon hit the scene.

I don't think we've seen the end of tanks, nor do I think they'll be totally automated. Despite the poor performance of Soviet/Russian designs, Western ones like the Abrams & Leopard are still performing remarkably well. The same design choices that protected them from ATGMs & rockets also help with drones. They're also still a nightmare to go up against. I do, however, believe that individual tanks will operate alongside supporting UGVs. Essentially vehicles similar to the M3 Bradley that already support the MBTs, but smaller & more expendable. It's far more common for MBTs to operate alone, rather than the old 4 tank platoon setup, so this would be a more feasible support structure than entire vehicles. Similar in concept to the "Loyal Wingman" system for aerial drones.

On that, the same story applies for the air. Manned aircraft will still be flying, but supplemented & supported by aircraft like the MQ-28 Ghost Bat & XQ-58A Valkyrie. These aircraft can be used for extremely dangerous missions like Wild Weasel flights or CAS, where they're likely to go down without sacrificing a much more expensive aircraft & pilot. Depending on how many can produced, this may turn into WW2 levels of air to air combat again. This is a much bigger threat for the infantry than FPVs, as it means they're once again going to be getting strafed & bombed with the ordnance of a an actual aircraft. A suspect the return of close air defense systems like the Gepard to the front, as well as greater proliferation of MANPADS among zero line units. These were always very rare in infantry units, it may be necessary to have multiple within a squad.

I am not technologically savvy enough to predict the future of electronic warfare, but I'm sure those nerds have plenty of tricks up their sleeve.

At the end of the day, it's going to be US Marines & PLA conscripts trying to waste each other in the ruins of Taipei. All the extra tools & weapons won't change anything other than tactics. Despite the grandiose technological revolution of the 20th & 21st centuries, Pokrovsk currently looks identical to the Somme.

The main takeaway for warfighters is that there is no room for tourists or morons. You could get away with mistakes before, you could get away with being lazy or uninformed. Now, any slip up means death. The meat grinder assaults of WW2, throwing barely trained conscripts at fortified positions in Seelow Heights or Okinawa, will result in nothing but death. More than a thousand Russian conscripts learn this everyday. The modern battlefield is ruled by professional soldiers who are intimately familiar with their trade & able to adapt. This is why units like Azov & 3AB are so successful compared to random rank & file units. Same with VDV & Spetsnaz units on the other side. There's no more "overwhelming the enemy," you can throw 20 divisions through the Fulda Gap & all you'll see is their death.

The soldiers of today have to be better informed & stronger than ever before in human history, barring our most ancient ancestors who fought for their survival every day. There's no more "slipping by," you either sink or swim. Can't pay attention during a patrol? Killed by a mine or a waiter. Can't be bothered to set up a proper position? An FPV will fly through the door & kill you in your sleeping bag. Too lazy to keep OPSEC in mind when away from the zero line? Atomized by a strike drone. Too stingy to buy a decent weapon light? Shot through the head from a window you can't see inside of. Too scared to breach a door way? Now you're a red splatter on the wall next to it. Too out of shape to sprinter across an open area while carrying 75kg of gear? Compromised & blown apart by artillery. I can go on with this so long my app will crash because of all the text.

The soldiers that manned the trenches of WW1 would be completely useless today, by the time of WW2 the tactics & standards of the elite Stormtrooper units were the baseline for basic infantry. The most elite troops of WW2, like the famous Marine Raiders, operated at a much lower level then the basic infantry that invaded Panama or Kuwait a few decades later. The US Marine Corps is currently evolving its infantry training & standards to match those of the 75th Ranger Regiment, apparently the French Foreign Legion is pursuing a similar goal. This trend will continue, as the baseline continues to rise. The weight will get heavier, tactics more complex, technology more advanced, mistakes punished more thoroughly. The soldiers who go to war in 2050 will give today's Delta a run for their money. Anyone less will simply rot away in a trench until their numbers up.

War is anti-egalitarian.

Hail Victory.

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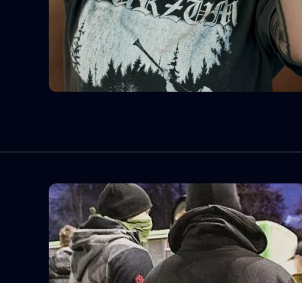

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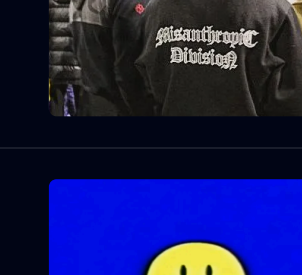

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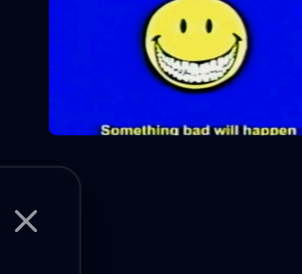

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